



# In the Public Eye

## News and Features

### US physicians may be failing to recognize substance misuse

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A survey by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University, New York, has found that 94% of primary care physicians may be missing or misdiagnosing alcohol-abusing patients.

Researchers presented a test case to a national representative sample of doctors. The case scenario stated, "A 38-year-old married patient has recurrent abdominal pain, intermittently elevated blood pressure, gastritis, and irritability, and wakes up frequently at night." Only 6% of physicians mentioned alcohol misuse as a possible diagnosis.

Richard Corlin, a California gastroenterologist, said that while the symptoms "are vague and common [and] can be related to a whole variety of conditions, they clearly indicate alcohol abuse, and doctors need to be made more aware of this possibility."

In the same survey, 41% of pediatricians failed to suggest drug misuse when presented with a classic description of a teenaged patient who is misusing drugs.

The survey of 648 primary care physicians, the most comprehensive so far, involved physicians in family medicine, general practice, internal medicine, obstetrics and gynecology, and pediatrics.

### Doctors need to be more aware of this possibility

Only 19.9% of physicians felt that they were "very prepared" to deal with alcoholism, while only 16.9% felt very prepared to manage illegal drug use. In sharp contrast, 82.8% felt very prepared to identify hypertension, 82.3% to identify diabetes, and 44.1% to identify depression.

Although most physicians felt that medical treatment was effective for hypertension and diabetes, only 3.6% thought that it was effective for alcohol dependence and 2.1% for substance misuse.

The study also surveyed 510 patients being treated for substance misuse. Most (53.7%) said that their primary care physician did nothing about their addiction, 43% said that the physician never diagnosed it, and 10.7% said that the physician knew about it but did nothing.

Most physicians (57.7%) said that they do not discuss substance abuse with their patients because they believe their patients lie about it, and nearly 85% of patients agreed that they lie. More than a third (35.1%) of physicians cited time constraints as a reason for failure to discuss the issue, and 10.6% were concerned that they would not be reimbursed for the time necessary to screen and treat a substance-abusing patient. Less than a third of primary care physicians (32.1%) carefully screened for substance abuse.

The president of the center, Joseph A. Califano Jr, who is a former US Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, said,

Substance abuse and addiction is the nation's number one disease. Primary care physicians must stop ignoring this elephant in their examining rooms. Medical schools, residency programs, and continuing medical education courses have an obligation to provide the training these physicians need to spot and deal with substance abuse.

Advice on how to screen patients for alcohol and drug misuse recently appeared in *wjm* (Cesar A. Aristeiguieta: "Screening Patients for Alcohol, Tobacco, and Other Drug Misuse: the Role of Brief Interventions," January 2000, vol 173, pp 53-57).